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ABSTRACT

Language problems are likely the strongest single barrier to success facing limited English proficient (LEP) immigrants to the United States. Therefore, instruction in English as a second language (ESL) for immigrants must be given a high priority. Vocational ESL (VESL) provides adult immigrants with English skills on an as-needed basis in cooperation with a program of vocational training. The ESL teacher and the vocational trainer coordinate their efforts, thereby allowing students to see the connection between their needs and their English lessons. Because cultural laws have not been codified and are not formally taught, cultural adjustment may be more difficult for many LEP immigrants than learning English. Activities that allow students to experience real-world situations in a nonthreatening environment are necessary to help LEP individuals build cultural self-confidence and adjust culturally. Techniques that have been found to be effective in VESL include introducing one concept at a time, using a slower pace in introducing information, using shorter lectures and more demonstrations, providing bilingual glossaries, explaining key concepts in the native language, using visual support materials, and modifying tests to evaluate mastery of content rather than English. The work experience and workplace training approaches are also effective in teaching employability skills. (MN)

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OVERVIEW

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BILINGUAL VOCATIONAL EDUCATION FOR IMMIGRANTS

What Problems Do Adult Immigrants Face?

Between 3.5 and 6.5 million adults in America are limited English-proficient (LEP). Most are immigrants; many understand virtually no English. Eighty percent of the "new" immigrants (those arriving since 1970) are from the Third World and have limited job skills.

Such limitations make the immigrant's earliest tasks difficult. Housing and food are pressing needs, but limited English proficiency and no job prospects make food shopping difficult and apartment hunting nearly impossible. Then, the children must be enrolled in school and utilities must be contracted. The individual has to learn to read a bus schedule, to shop for goods and services, and to sign a check (which may require learning a new alphabet).

To finance this new way of life, the individual needs a job. Most immigrants face major obstacles in obtaining employment. Lopez-Valadez and others (1985) have identified four such obstacles.

- Lack of English skills is possibly the greatest single barrier to employment success faced by LEP adults.
- Cultural differences, which can cause symptoms from slight confusion and homesickness to a total "shut down" of functioning, impede the individual in all phases of the employment process.
- Few immigrants have skills directly transferable to the American workplace.
- Many employers and the general public resist the hiring of immigrants, fearing that there will be communication difficulties or that "American" jobs will be taken.

What Method Can Be Used to Teach English for Employability?

A major obstacle for immigrant Hispanic workers is the lack of English skills (National Commission for Employment Policy 1982). It is indeed likely that language problems are the strongest single barrier to success for all LEP workers in the United States. Thus, the adult immigrant must set learning English as a second language (ESL) as a high priority.

Vocational ESL (VESL) provides adult immigrants with English skills on an "as-needed" basis in cooperation with a program of vocational training. The ESL teacher and the trainer coordinate their efforts. VESL has been shown to be an effective approach for teaching English to adult immigrants. Since students can see the connection between their needs and the lessons in English, they are motivated to stay in class and learn their lessons. Under ideal conditions, VESL students can finish their training as quickly as their English-speaking peers. However, it must be noted that the English taught in VESL classes is far from comprehensive.

Friedenberg (in Lopez-Valadez et al. 1985) says that the successful VESL program has three characteristics: VESL instruction must be job specific; VESL instruction and job training should occur simultaneously and be closely coordinated by the instructors; and when necessary, job training should use the student's native language.

After the trainer and the VESL instructor have discussed priorities and the various tasks to be taught, the VESL instructor creates a lesson plan for each unit that includes the vocational topic, vocabulary, relevant grammatical structures, language skills needed (listening, speaking, and so forth), and relevant cultural information. VESL instructors usually balance structured activities (drills, puzzles, and close-ended responses) with communicative activities (role playing, completing forms, and open-ended questions).

What Strategies Are Used to Overcome Cultural Differences?

Cultural adjustment may be more difficult for many LEP individuals than learning English because cultural laws have not been codified and are not formally taught. Indeed, many Americans as well as immigrants are not aware of the strong influence that culture exerts. Since it is not feasible to sensitize a whole society to the cultural variations of each group of immigrants, much of the burden of cultural adjustment falls to the new resident and the educational service provider.

The American workplace has a subculture all its own, characterized by acceptable and unacceptable behaviors and unwritten laws. Few immigrants, for example, immediately know that American life is fragmented into segments of time and that punctuality counts. The American job interview requires such cultural behaviors as directness, clear and confident responses, and eye contact. These behaviors are difficult for many Americans to master and are even harder for immigrants who have very different values and a weak command of the English language.

True adjustment requires examination of one's self, one's native culture, and the new society's values and behaviors. Awareness of and sensitivity to cultural obstacles by the educational service provider are the first steps toward helping the immigrant adjust to American life. Talking with a culturally sensitive person, the immigrant can get the right answers about what is expected and what is considered wrong.

Lucas (in Lopez-Valadez et al. 1985) lists the following activities that may facilitate cultural adjustment.

- Role play job interviews and on-the-job situations.
- Set aside Job Interview Dress Day.
- Listen to or read a job interview or on-the-job conversation and discuss.

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- Tour vocational training centers and local industries.
- Develop slides or videotapes of appropriate and inappropriate employability behaviors for discussion.

These activities allow students to experience "real world" situations in a nonthreatening environment. This experience is followed by discussion of findings with peers and with a culturally sensitized American. The activities build cultural self-confidence and facilitate cultural adjustment.

What Methods Are Useful in Teaching Vocational Skills?

Immigrant clients have varying backgrounds, and thus, their training needs are very different. The amount and type of assistance required by a trainee are determined by an analysis of employment background, educational background, English language proficiency, experience with United States culture, and the individual's personal goals.

Adult immigrants need to enter the job market quickly. Short-term (less than 1 year) intensive training is usually appropriate, although some will opt for longer term or part-time programs. Those who lack English or other basic skills may need to spend some time in a preentry training preparation program that will extend the total time needed for training.

Typically, employment-related training for immigrant adults can be delivered through vocational programs, work experience programs, ESL classrooms (discussed earlier), and the workplace (Kremer and Savage 1985). In Lopez-Valadez and others (1985), Kremer focuses on the vocational classroom approach that prepares adult immigrants for specific occupations. Students may either be mainstreamed into regular vocational classes with English-speaking vocational students or be placed in special classes. In either case, the student needs extensive support services to be successful. Support may range from peer tutoring to providing a personal translator for exams and quizzes.

Since training will usually occur in English, some adaptation is required. Adaptation of instruction for LEP students includes adjustments in the curriculum, materials, and approaches. The following techniques are suggested.

- Introduce one concept at a time.
- Use a slower pace in introducing information.
- Use shorter lectures and more demonstrations.
- Explain key concepts in the native language.
- Provide bilingual glossaries.
- Check readability and adapt materials if necessary.
- Summarize or outline long, difficult readings.
- Check comprehension frequently.
- Use visual support materials.
- Modify tests to evaluate mastery of content, not of English.

By using the student's native language selectively, the instructor can teach job skills during the first class. Students' self-images improve as they experience their own language as an asset instead of an obstacle.

Two other approaches are also used to teach employability skills. The work experience approach combines classroom learning with unpaid experience in a work setting. Another option, the workplace training approach, emphasizes training at the work site. The individuals who take part in this training are already employed; the purpose of training is to make them better, more promotable employees. Often, this special training is supported by the employer.

At the completion of a training program, most immigrants will need help finding jobs. The job developer may provide the link between the trained immigrant and the American employer. There are two methods of job development: crisis placement and investment. The former views the client's need for employment as critical. The investment approach, on the other hand, does not guarantee immediate placement but builds for the future. In this approach, the job developer researches employers' needs and provides a product (the client) that addresses them. The agency runs less risk of unsatisfied employers and may actually receive other job offers because of a good first placement.

The job developer must think of the employee as a product to be marketed in order to be successful. For example, Utah employers rated Indochinese refugee employees' work habits more highly than those of employees in general (Latkiewicz 1982). This is the kind of information that job developers must use to make immigrant trainees more attractive. Job developers should also educate employers on the tax benefits and training reimbursements available for those who hire certain targeted groups to which many immigrants may belong.

Not surprisingly, the communication barrier was seen as the greatest disadvantage of hiring refugees. The agency should offer whatever support may be needed in the first few months of employment when communications do break down. This support could take the form of employee counseling or training for supervisors, and is another selling point to be used when placing an immigrant into a job.

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This ERIC Digest is based on the following publication:

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